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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for innovative research paradigms in assessing the impact of television on children. Past research has shown that television, as part of a child's environment, can influence the social behavior of young children in positive and negative ways. It is suggested that researchers now study ways in which children's programing can become a medium which interacts with the child, performing a type of "surrogate" function. It is also suggested that effective programing would allow the child to learn about himself in relation to what he sees on television, leading to growth in self concept and self esteem. One such television program for children, "Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids" is presented as an example of an attempt to look at issues, problems and concerns faced by children as they grow and develop. A study which investigated the Fat Albert series to determine to what extent the prosocial messages of the program were communicated to children found that almost nine out of ten children (89.3 percent) received one or more specific prosocial messages from viewing an episode of Fat Albert. The findings do not indicate whether the messages were accepted or if they modified subsequent behavior. Research models and methodologies aimed at improving the theory and evaluation of television as it relates to the child are called for. (BRT)

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RESEARCH, TELEVISION AND THE CHILD:

THE NEED FOR RISK-TAKERS

Paper Presented at the Biennial Meeting
of the
Society for Research in Child Development

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AN EXPANDING VIEW OF TELEVISION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT:

"AND (NO LONGER) SHUN THE FRUMIOUS BANDERSNATCH"

RESEARCH, TELEVISION AND THE CHILD:

THE NEED FOR RISK-TAKERS

Students of behavior and society spend a great deal of their time looking at how television influences the lives of children. Such an inquiry into the impact of television on behavior is important because this vehicle has assisted in creating a generation of audio-visual giants with hugh appetites for what the medium has to offer. While the menu offered these child-giants has at times been excellent, some attempts to feed them have needed to be accompanied by a dose of Pepto Bismol in order to make the serving digestible.

Clearly, this is not the period for specialists from a variety of areas to reduce their research on the impact of television because there are new issues and different questions emerging. Since good research is so extremely important, specialists need to be careful not to fall into the old trap of arguing over and revalidating concepts which are so generic to the findings in child development. Rather, the time is now to look at those tough issues which will call for raising different hypotheses, seeking new methodologies and generally being professional "risk-takers."

For example, early principles of child development clearly show that behavior and attitudes of children reflect patterns of their early environmental experiences and exposure (Hurlock, 1956). We should not, therefore, be confused when laboratory and field research conclude

that television, as part of the environment, can influence the social behavior of some children in positive and negative ways. None of the assumptions in this example can be considered in a simplistic manner because there are questions of degree, kind, and a host of other factors. The point being made is that by combining the research related to television with the basic knowledge available in child development, it is possible to move our assumptions to a point where we can identify additional stages for research into this medium.

One step would be to assume that television content can and does have the potential to shape attitudes and to elicit certain types of behavioral responses from selected children. In addition, there is a long history associated with the principle in child development which recognizes that modeling behavior in the child can take place through selected visual cues or images associated with such a medium as television.

Leifer, Gordon and Graves in an article published in the Harvard Educational Review (1974) argued that "television is not only entertainment for children, it is also an important socializer of them." Given what is known from child development and research related to television, one might consider the possibility of television taking on a type of "surrogate" role for the child viewer. This surrogate concept is not the traditional baby sitting role ascribed to television. Rather, it relates to the ability of this medium to offer content, moods, tone and images that will interact with the child in such a way as to correct, refine and clarify his or her thoughts and feelings; just as a parent or an adult would do.

The socializer conclusion articulated by Leifer and others as well as the surrogate notion can especially be important in those broad areas of self concept and self esteem. The child, interacting with the television content, can see people and behavior which pose questions of: Who am I? What am I? Who are they? Am I good or bad? How can I change my behavior, thoughts and appearance to be like the models on television?

The television series, Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids, was a risk-taking effort because it was one of the early attempts to move away from strictly cognitive content and to look at issues, problems and concerns faced by children as they grow and develop. Thus, messages of sibling rivalry, peer group pressure, differences in physical traits found among children, the consequences of telling lies and cheating to enhance self esteem, and the problems faced by a child whose parents are divorced were all considered in the series.

Since the project was considered experimental, the Office of Social Research of CBS in collaboration with the Gene Reilly Group conducted a study on the Fat Albert Series (1974). The primary objective of the study was to determine whether -- and if so to what degree -- the "pro-social" messages of Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids were communicated to its audience. It also had other innovative features which addressed itself to methodological questions.

A total of 711 children, aged seven to eleven, who were at least familiar with the Fat Albert Series, were interviewed. This group constituted a quota sample, stratified by sex, age, race, socio-economic status, and city of residence (Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Memphis areas). Each child saw one new (previously un-aired) episode of Fat Albert in either the captive or natural situation, and was interviewed

immediately thereafter (captive) or within five hours thereafter (natural). Those portions of the questionnaire bearing on the program's message(s) were completely open-ended; accordingly no message was suggested to a child by either the questionnaire or the interviewer.

Overall, almost nine out of ten children (89.3%) received one or more specific pro-social messages from the episode of Fat Albert which he or she viewed, as compared with 10% who received no message.

No statistically significant differences in the reception of messages occurred between children interviewed in the captive or natural situations, between those interviewed in different cities, or between boys and girls. Older children (9-11) were significantly more likely (93.4%) to receive one or more pro-social messages than younger children (7-8, 84.6%). White children were more likely to receive such messages (94.2%, middle class background; 90%, lower class background) than were black children of lower class background (83.7%).

Here as in a number of studies, it dealt with the reception of messages. The findings do not indicate whether the messages were accepted or whether they did or did not modify the children's subsequent behavior.

Having discussed briefly some well-known notions about television and child development, argued that television can serve a type of "surrogate" function for the child viewer, raised the issue of television content and its relationship to self concept and self esteem, and mentioned the broad findings of the national study on Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids, permit me to return briefly to some issues related to risk-taking and research. Time will not permit me to do more than to offer some general concepts, and the lack of profundity will keep the ideas from being on the cutting edge of new methodology. Nevertheless,

just a couple of thoughts about television and the need to look at some research and evaluation issues.

For example, television is a medium which uses a great deal of media to get its messages or program ideas to the viewer. Classical research designs of experimental and control groups while excellent, often cannot account for all of the stimuli bombarding the child. Thus, as we seek to test our hypotheses, it suddenly becomes necessary to account for the messages of the content, lighting, color, music, setting, presence of an authority figure, voice and a host of other cues. We know that the child is not one dimensional, but neither is the television. There is a clear need, therefore, to build research models capable of handling the variability and diverse messages being presented to the child.

To date, some of our present research approaches tend to provide small clusters of data growing out of central tendency measures. Even with the more complex statistical and/or mathematical modes, while they are close to capturing the "holistic variables" confronting a research design for television, we are still left with a matrix which permits limited generalizations. While the audience will note that I did not offer an innovative model capable of solving the problem, it is worth calling attention to the complexity facing the researcher in this multi-variable media. This factor of complexity is especially true since, unlike traditional research settings of a school or clinic, this vehicle reaches a population of millions in one showing.

Model building calls for child development specialists to begin to conceptualize and create notions related to research design and evaluation methodologies. While these notions are not antagonistic to action

research or research of any kind, it does reflect a belief that television as a field of inquiry is still young enough that we need spend a fair amount of time working out innovative methodologies and research models to meet its distinctive characteristics.

The call for models and methodologies in this context is aimed at improving the theory of research and evaluation into television as it relates to the child. New evaluative approaches could then provide professionals, media specialists, network personnel and lay groups with the tools necessary for making better decisions related to good programming.

Permit me to quickly point out that the Fat Albert Program from my perspective was clearly aimed at providing pro-social messages related to growth and development issues faced by children. And yet, it also had an objective of trying to effectively bring together the academic community types with network and media specialists in order to build a cooperative working model which could have some exportable qualities to it. In addition, the subsequent research that emerged from the project raised certain interviewing and sampling methodologies that hopefully contributed to the field, or at least raised a question or two.

A number of our present children's programs rely on summative evaluation as a major approach to answering research questions. Given the complex audio, visual and cultural features manifested in a single television show, I toyed with attempting to build the objectives for Fat Albert utilizing formative evaluation approaches. Formative evaluation models in television would require that important objectives be clearly identified and systematic tests carried out in order to evaluate progress toward their achievement . . . in this regard the findings are fed

into the decision-making process in an ongoing manner (Laosa, 1974). Utilizing a formative evaluation strategy, problems encountered and modifications made can be clearly reported to the developers in order that they can see which part of the medium's complex cues needed to be adjusted or avoided because it impacted on the subjects (viewers) in a certain manner.

Once again, the major study conducted by the CBS Office of Social Research on the Fat Albert series was clearly summative in structure and form. My participation with the Fat Albert Show and the work of other well known children's groups has led me to believe that more evaluators of children's programs need to employ formative research procedures in their evaluation designs and program development.

Thus, I return to an original premise which was that television is a powerful medium with the capacity to tap into the very core of the child's social and psychological behavior. If we are to continue to look at these issues and related ones, there is going to be a need for risk-takers who will move beyond traditional approaches in considering the impact of television on the hearts and minds of our children.

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